**HOME WORKING AND THE LIKE**

I am an independent consultant. A large part of my working life is spent on the road, meeting customers, and working at client locations. I am not convinced that people can work efficiently in a “virtual office” where your workspace is anywhere that there is an internet connection. If you spend weeks out of the office and then return to toil on projects, you need an office. You need to establish what is the physical footprint required, space and what facilities you need.

What it requires is somewhere that is efficient and yet makes you feel good. When you have to sit there on a sunny Sunday afternoon, because your client (who is probably out playing golf) needs something for Monday morning, then you better have a workplace that attracts you.

In this new millennium, modern man’s workspace is the equivalent of yesteryears garden shed. It can develop into a sanctuary (Man Cave) when other parts of the house become “no-go” zones. It is also a location to keep track of personal life, paying bills, leisure internet surfing and shopping, and family travel planning. It is a matter of temperament and individual circumstance as to if this will work for you.

The following checklist will help you reach some necessary conclusions about wants, needs, and must-haves. It is not essential to have everything immediately, create the space first, and expand over-time.

**CHECKLIST**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Can I work from home?** | Yes | No |
| **Can I have a dedicated area in my home?** | Yes | No |
| **Will I have clients visiting my home?** | Yes | No |
| **Will, I principally work (a) from my home office, (b) on the road, or (c) at my client’s office?** | 1. – (b) – (c) | |
| **Can I create/do I need external access to my home office?** | Yes | No |
| **Do I have enough room to expand, store files, add equipment?** | Yes | No |
| **Do I have room to create a stand-alone office?** | Yes | No |
| **DO I have room to expand that facility if needed later?** | Yes | No |
| **Will there be space for others to work in the home office if required?** | Yes | No |
| **Are there convenient toilet facilities available?** | Yes | No |
| **Are there alternate office facilities nearby that can be used in necessary?** | Yes | No |
| **Can I share offices and costs with other professionals?** | Yes | No |
| **Will I require planning permission to create my home office** | Yes | No |

This checklist should provide clarity to the idea, and understanding as to what is easy to do, and what requires time and funds.

**CAN I WORK AT HOME?**

It is a big decision. Will you be able to work without distraction from relatives, dogs, children, the locality? Ask yourself, if you are in an hour-long conference call, can you take that time, uninterrupted, take notes, and contribute entirely from the home office you are planning. Your workspace says a lot about you, and it needs to reflect who you are if you are to enjoy working there and being productive.

**CAN I HAVE A DEDICATED WORKING AREA AT HOME?**

Think that wherever you work, it has to be secure. Additionally, if you are working from a house or apartment, it has to be a space where you can drop everything and go about other aspects of your life. It is no fun having to move your office because some friends are coming around for dinner, or a weekend stay.

**WILL I HAVE CLIENTS VISITING MY HOME?**

I would avoid this if possible, do so if you have an external office. If they are checking you out, and it's avoidable, take them out to lunch or dinner. If you have restricted work conditions, don’t try and do business across the kitchen table.

**CAN I CREATE AN EXTERNAL ACCESS TO MY HOME OFFICE?**

If you choose to work from home and you want or need a secure space to be able to perform this, consider an area that has access from outside, so clients and suppliers can come and go without disturbing or being aware of the rest of the house.

Any home office as an alternative to a “real office” needs to be clean, tidy, and presentable. Very few clients are as eccentric and unconventional as yourself. Avoid being too conservative, make your home office your own, and try not to invite clients to visit too often, if at all.

**PLAY SAFE**

Invest in a safe. You may not have a stash of gold bars or uncut diamonds, but you do have something of great importance – your professional life.

A good safe is not expensive; a fireproof safe is the ideal, one that can be secured to the office, and be difficult and cumbersome to move. A safe can contain:

* Company documents, articles of incorporation;
* Invoices file, hard copy;
* Proposals file, hard copy;
* Contract agreement, hard copy;
* Signed Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDA);
* Cheque books and banking related documents;
* Credit cards, access codes, and passwords;
* Foreign currency for travelling;
* Passports, and other certificates such as birth marriage, residency;
* Contracts and claim forms for travel insurance, medical cover, etc.;
* Back up DVD’s.

A functional safe is not too expensive, and it’s a small price to pay for peace of mind.

**DO YOU HAVE A VIEW?**

Not as stupid as it sounds. If possible, do not face a blank wall. Being able to see the sky, enjoy natural light, and the heat of the sun and the world around you is cathartic. Sometimes, when things are really not going well, it helps – believe me!

**A GIGANTIC CHAIR!**

It is possible to sit at a desk staring at a PC screen all day, and possibly all night as well. Two things are required:

* Stretch breaks;
* A big comfy office chair and footstool.

From your chair, you can read documents, take breaks, and be a little more civilised than the remainder of toiling humanity. When planning your home office, allow enough room for that chair.

Don’t forget; it's your office, not theirs; you can do what you want. It’s quite liberating to be able to crank up a bit of Pink Floyd on a rainy day; you can’t do that in a “real office” can you?

**WHAT PLANET DOES STATIONARY COME FROM?**

If you have worked in corporate offices, there’s a good chance that you will not know where office supplies come from, why should you? There was office lore of a mysterious Stationary Cupboard…

There are two options:

* If you plan to use a lot of materials, set up an account with a local office supply company.
* If you are not sure how much you need, buy some basics, and work out your needs from there.

**Beware!** If you have never been to an office supply superstore, go with a responsible adult. You simply do not need all those multicoloured paper clips, even if they are on offer – trust me!

**THE WHOLE WORLD IS TALKING, AND YOU NEED TO KNOW WHAT THEY ARE SAYING!**

Today’s phones are becoming computers, and vice versa. The need to be in the same place as the client to pass documents and images has disappeared. Some investment is required for the home office, such as:

* A desktop computer, although a laptop with a docking station will also work;
* A laptop;
* A cell phone;
* A fixed line phone with broadband;
* A printer;
* A scanner;
* A copier.

There is so much technology available; what matters is how well it works for you.

The key to technology is to keep it updated, especially when the real gain is apparent, or there is a danger of falling behind the applications used by clients.

The significant advantage is something that makes work easier, quicker, or you more accessible. A big issue today is the assumption by others that technology works when we all know that it is fallible. For the independent consultant, being in touch is vital. No matter how much technology you have, it will not sell anything for you. It is you, your ideas, your energy, expertise, and enthusiasm that clients are contracting, and they expect to stay in touch.

Make sure that you have face to face access with a knowledgeable IT expert. Remember, with technology, you get what you paid for, so if you purchased it cheap, expect issues. Nobody can afford their IT systems to be down for very long; we depend on them too much. As an independent consultant, you are providing a professional service and charging professional fees. So, when you need help, use a professional.

**RULES ARE FOR THE OBEDIENCE OF FOOLS AND THE GUIDANCE OF WISE MEN**

Some rules are necessary now that you have your home office. Make sure that you have rules for your office and that they work for you. It’s not prison (although it can feel that way sometimes), let people around you, family, know when they have visiting rights.

Things happen:

* Beware of clutter-creep. Stuff appear because your home office becomes a storeroom for things others don’t know what to do with;
* Because you have Sellotape, scissors etc., your office becomes a room for odd jobs.
* It becomes a convenient hiding place.
* Do not install a large fridge; this creates opportunities for multiple visits.
* Learn to dread and be deaf to the phrase “just put this in your office for a day or two”, things seem to take up permanent residence.

Working from a home office can be a double-edged sword. There are benefits that any employee in a “real office” would enjoy:

**PROS**

* You are free to do whatever you like;
* No commuting is required;
* Shorts and “T”-shirt are standard office dress;
* You are not micromanaged;
* A small portion of your home office expenses can be claimed in tax returns;
* This work situation could be personally convenient for you.

**CONS**

* It takes a lot of self-discipline to go work when you know you don't have to be at the office by eight in the morning;
* There is only you in the office, so there is no outside pressure to be busy;
* Self-motivation is an essential ingredient;
* Office social life and camaraderie is missing;
* There are no colleagues to go to lunch with;
* You can never escape the office and go home;
* Working from home can take up a lot of space in your home;
* Shared time with colleagues is missing, making it difficult to share project work and brainstorm ideas;
* You are not visible, so if you are putting extra hours and working hard, it is not noticed. You will be judged on your output and not your work ethic, and workplace discipline;
* There is a danger of overworking. It's too easy to go into your home office and work all hours.

Remember to ask yourself if working from a home office is a work style that fits with what I want and does this make me effective?

It is important to remember:

* Maintain a presence with your client(s). Check in a lot in, remind them that you are still alive and productive;
* Treat your home office like a “real office”. Close the door and go home at the end of a working day and do not open it again until the next working day.

Be consistent with your office hours. Act like you are in a “real office” not at home, this attitude will stand in good stead, and increase your productivity.

Take note, working from a home office either as an independent consultant or as a remote employee is a results-only environment.

It takes a particular mentality and skill set to work from home. That may not be immediately evident if the opportunity presents itself, or you decide on that course. It's easy to focus on the positives of not having a commute, saving money, not having to dress for work, and so many other things.

Sure, working from home can have its disadvantages… I miss the office politics, the lack of freedom and having to wear shoes…

